


Book review of *Revolution in Higher Education*

DeMillo, R. A. (2015). *Revolution in Higher Education: How a small band of innovators will make college accessible and affordable*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press. 360 pages. ISBN: 9780262533614.

Reviewed by: Jennifer A. Kepka 
Doctoral student, Boise State University (USA)
jenniferkepka@u.boisestate.edu

Introduction

The growth of online teaching and learning has stimulated debate about the role of higher education for years. In *Revolution in Higher Education: How a small band of innovators will make college accessible and affordable* (2015), DeMillo critiques faculty practice and governance in the modern American collegiate institution. Ultimately, DeMillo is interested in whether higher education institutions can still maintain their social contract with constituents – and whether they can even identify who those constituents may be. He predicts that making college education accessible to many will require bypassing the current structure of higher education institutions themselves, as some have already started to do.

Structure and content

DeMillo is the director of the Center for 21st Century Universities at Georgia Tech. As such, he is not an uninterested party, and the book is an extended argument in favor of the innovators he has studied and among whose number he counts himself. Beginning with the “Magic Year” of 2012 (p. 11), DeMillo introduces his selected “band” of innovators as they begin disrupting the traditional model of classroom instruction. Herein he interviews and follows Daphne Koller and Andrew Ng as Coursera incubates; breakfasts with Sebastian Thrun as Udacity is launching; trades notes and phone calls with Arizona State University president Michael Crow as he expands his university’s mission online; strolls the empty lofts of Ben Nelson’s soon-to-open Minerva Project; and recounts the online birth and expansion of the MIT Open Courseware Project under Anant Agarwal. In 2012 and 2013, these projects were launching into public attention and at various levels of practical engagement, and all had common interest in the Massively Open Online Course.

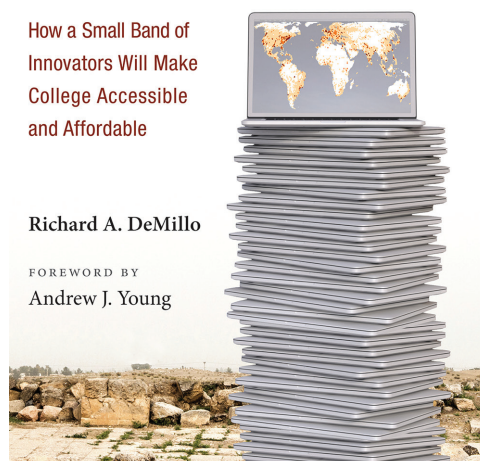
Setting up the stories with ample suspense, DeMillo moves away from his case-study stars to provide the backstory that proves this band of innovators’ experiments both dramatic and, in DeMillo’s view, necessary. DeMillo argues that learning requires not just a teacher lecturing a class, after all, but engagement through the “levity, brevity, and repetition” (p. 64) that sparks chemical changes in neurons believed to establish learning (or at least brain-level change) (pp. 66–67). In-person instruction can achieve this ably, DeMillo notes: he is particularly complimentary of Bloom’s

Revolution in Higher Education

How a Small Band of
Innovators Will Make
College Accessible
and Affordable

Richard A. DeMillo

FOREWORD BY
Andrew J. Young



Mastery Learning technique and its dramatic effectiveness when one-on-one tutoring is combined with a “feedback-corrective instruction-retest cycle” (p. 79). Technology, DeMillo notes, now makes this otherwise cost-ineffective method possible – if students and faculty are willing to move online.

Students are already online and ready to stay there, he surmises, but faculty and institutions are not – at least, not yet. This is a problem DeMillo explains in the second part of the book, “Rationale for a Revolution”, which explains the barriers not to online success but to the survival of the current system. College budgets are complex, tuition-driven, and laden with burdens of overwhelming labor costs and limited choices for income expansions, DeMillo explains. As state disinvestment continues, the only way for higher education to survive is to provide more services at lower costs – which will mean dramatic reductions in staffing. Chapters 7, 8, and 9 lay out the case for why the current ways that colleges organize and view themselves is inaccurate and, in DeMillo’s view, damaging. The desire for prestige and the protection of university brands has led colleges to expand beyond their own interests, and elitism has begun to be (wrongly) assumed to equal excellence (p. 165). Asserting that universities worldwide are infected with an elite-envy disease, DeMillo describes how the desire for prestige has driven colleges away from serving their local populations or contexts. While every community college ponders how it can increase its research output, DeMillo argues, students with no interest in their instructors’ publication rates pile up debt to pay for services they neither need nor want.

In the third part of the book, “Ramparts”, DeMillo blames administrators, faculty, and, in particular, institutions like the American Association of University Professors for this problem. DeMillo argues that faculty efforts to stymie innovation (under the guise of job protection) have made universities into lumbering, inept giants, unable to respond to the rapid exponential changes of the technology age. In addition, after pacing through recent controversial firings and free speech cases, DeMillo finds that tenure is both ineffective at protecting faculty from being mobbed by the groupthink of their peers and also effective at allowing institutionalists to rage against the encroachment of technology.

Overall impression and relevance to the field of distance education and e-learning

Arguments like these may draw more fire than the book’s ultimate conclusion: that something must change, and soon, in how higher education is administered. He suggests that colleges abandon the fruitless pursuit of further elite ranking and instead focus tightly on providing the best possible education to the most students within the context that each institution was built to serve. For seasoned higher education administrators and faculty members, this book will challenge many closely held assumptions about what defines a university. That discomfort is certainly intentional, and like DeMillo’s last book, this should provoke discussion. Unlike in his last book, however, in this book DeMillo takes more concrete positions on what the correct next steps might be – and may, in so doing, turn off many who have benefitted from conventions like tenure in the process.